Legend of Shakspeare's Crab Tree.

C. F Green, del et. lith.

SHAKSPEAR'S CRAB-TREE.

THE

LEGEND

OF

SHAKSPEARE'S CRAB TREE,

WITH

A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT,

SHOWING ITS RELATION TO

THE POET'S TRADITIONAL HISTORY.

BY

CHARLES FREDERICK GREEN,

(Late of Stratford-on-Avon,)

ILLUSTRATED BY A SERIES OF NINE LITHOGRAPHIC PRINTS, FROM SKETCHES TAKEN BY HIM ON THE SPOT.

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PREFATORY REMARKS.

It is almost universally admitted, that every anecdote, however apocryphal, relative to our immortal Shakspeare, if it contain the slightest adumbration of truth, ought to be recorded, particularly when we reflect that millions yet unborn will dwell with rapture on his lofty lines, and become ennobled by the mighty influence they will exercise upon the minds of men. His sentiments are now so engrafted in our language that they are "Familiar in our mouths as household words;" his idioms, the gems of our English literature, will irradiate it with lustre to the end of time, for its peculiar beauties were by him made manifest.

We think as he thought, we are led by him, curious and inquiring, through all the realms of human fancy, and we see in his writings all the mysterious workings of the human heart unveiled. By him, and such as he was, a great bond of union has been formed, which, in after ages, will unite in holy brotherhood all the descendants of that Anglo-Saxon family now rapidly extending itself into every climate of the world, and whose members are becoming possessors of the soil, introducing with them our habits, manners, and amusements. In ages yet to come, they will honour the name of Shakspeare, and be proud of the affinity they bear to him; feeling, as they will do, that

" He was the mightiest man that ever lived in the tide of time." Then will the little town of Stratford-on-Avon become a literary Mecca; then will the pilgrims from the vast plains of Australasia, the banks of the Indus, and the now pathless woods of America, come to pay their homage at our poet's shrine.

Animated by a desire to know all that could be ascertained respecting my immortal townsman, occupying a similar station, attending the same school, and frequenting the same scenes from which he had enriched his mind, I thought it a duty incumbent on me to endeavour to clear away the darkness which two centuries of comparative neglect had accumlated upon his name in Stratford-on-Avon; to create an enthusiasm amongst the associates of my youth for the preservation of the few memorials of the Bard left in his natal town, to build a theatre on the land that once belonged to him, and bring the Shakspearean Club (which I had fostered) under the notice of the "Choice Master Spirits of the Age," by whose intellectual energies and perseverance they have preserved the poet's mausoleum from the ravages of time, rescued his birthplace from desecration, and presented it as an heirloom to the British nation.

A few friends have advised me to publish the result of my youthful inquiries into the Legend of Shakspeare's Crab Tree; and if, in the following pages, I shall have shown that there are as reasonable grounds for believing it, as the one of Charlecote Park, then shall I rejoice if they and my general readers will not esteem "My Hours of Idleness" "Love's Labour Lost."

LEGEND

OF

SHAKSPEARE'S CRAB TREE.

CHAPTER I.

HABITS OF THE YOUTHFUL SHAKSPEARE.—THE PROBABILITY OF HIS BACCHANALIAN ADVENTURE AT BIDFORD WITH THE TOPERS AND SIPPERS, FROM THE FREQUENCY OF SIMILAR CAROUSES IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE.

"They cast their caps up, and carouse together,
Like friends long lost."

LITTLE of an authentic nature is known of the immortal bard of Avon—particularly of his youthful habits, nor is it at all surprising that the life of an obscure *yeoman's son* did not engage the pen of a biographer of the sixteenth century; nor that the transcendent genius of his manhood so dazzled his contemporaries that they never thought of searching out the source whence it arose. The regret his premature death must have occasioned to those most familiar with him, who, in all their epistles, address him with the most affectionate regard as "Beloved friend," "Gentle

friend, "Good master," "Sweet swan of Avon," &c., clearly indicates how much he was beloved.

On his decease a very important duty devolved upon his "good fellows, Burbage, Hemming, and Condale," namely, to collect the effusions of his mighty mind, which were scattered abroad with profuse prodigality, and could only be procured from the playhouse copies and from various parties into whose hands they had fallen, and, but for them, his precious thoughts had been for ever lost. To the dispersed state in which he left his writings, is to be ascribed that admixture of alloy which is found amongst the brilliancy of his genuine effusions: again, before his friends had time to complete his biographical reminiscences the horrors of the great Civil War broke out, and for a time—

> "Laid this rich country waste, and rudely cropped
> Its rip'ning hopes of fair posterity."

The one sad consequence being the destruction by fanatical puritans of records from which a circumstantial account of Shakspeare might have been collected.

It is much to be lamented, that after all their indefatigable research his biographers found but scanty materials of an authentic nature; therefore, as we may now almost despair of ever filling up the chasms of undoubted history, we must endeavour to content ourselves with probabilities and the adopted chronicles of the neighbourhood of Stratford-on-Avon, one of which is the Legend of "The Crab Tree." Although I shall be able to trace its existence incontestibly to upwards of two hundred years, it is often referred to, and not unfrequently summarily dismissed, as the composition of some village rhymester, without any inquiry being instituted as to its historical or local truth; whilst, at the same time, the no less doubtful story of Charlecote Park is pertinaceously and implicitly believed. Yet the latter tradition comes in an equally questionable shape; the ballad on Sir Thomas Lucy being but a rough pasquinade containing no greater amount of poetic merit than the epi-

gram upon the villages, and claiming no higher authority than that of being first assumed to be correct by Rowe. It is to be regretted that this writer preferred relying on his fertile invention to the trouble of investigating sources of information to which at that time he had access, and which would have enabled him to write a reliable history of Shakspeare's life.

It must be obvious to every reader that Shakspeare enriched his mind in his native county from the green lap of nature, where, with so fertile an imagination, he could

> "Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in every thing."

The reflections of his youthful rambles beside the soft flowing Avon, through flowery mead, grove, upland, forest, hill, and dale, spread themselves throughout his works, and show the delight he took in remembering and portraying the salient features of the country round his native town, where even now the whole face of creation wears an aspect of quiet loveliness. Moreover, he must have had frequent opportunities of mixing with mankind—how else could even his subtle spirit become acquainted with the inmost workings of the human heart?

Tradition has, with great probability, described the youthful Shakspeare as indulging in desultory habits, and his station as a *yeoman's* son fosters that idea, inasmuch as it would afford him leisure and opportunity to become familiar with all the occupations of rural life as well as with the amusements of his times; when, in the lonely farmhouse and secluded hamlet, the rites of hospitality were observed with frequency and cordially dispensed. Then, every parish had its peculiar festivities; its Plough Mondays, its May-days, its Lamb Ales, its Whitsun Ales, its Holy Ales, &c., on all of which occasions good cheer abounded in every rustic house. This fact indicates, beyond all doubt, that joviality and boisterous mirth were the prevailing characteristics of the age, and that at that period Englishmen agreed with Sir Toby Belch that "He's a

coward, and a coystrel, that will not drink till his brains turn o' the toe like a parish top." Is it likely, then, that a generous nature such as Shakspeare's, in the buoyancy of youth, with leisure and inclination to boot, should absent himself from these annual bacchanalian orgies?

The monks of Bordesley Abbey enjoyed the privilege of holding an assay of bread and beer at Bidford upwards of four hundred years before the Reformation; and it is but fair to conjecture that these assayers of good cheer took special care that it should be of a superior quality; for the Bidfordians are of those who believe that, as "Bread is the staff of life, good Ale is life itself," and a sufficient quantity of the latter was essential and ever the prologue to their nightly rest. After the Reformation the privilege of assaying the bread and beer was transferred to *wise* and *discreet* persons who were called "Ale tasters and Bread weighers;" this appointment may have led to the formation of the good fellows designated "Topers" and "Sippers;" and it may, therefore, be fairly presumed that these were the jocund worthies who challenged the Stratfordians to a drinking contest.

There was another notable body designated "Ale tasters and Bread weighers" at Stratford-on-Avon, appointed by the bailiffs and subsequently by the mayors, whose bibulous capabilities the Bidfordians might be desirous of ascertaining. Such a challenge resembles those in use even to this day between the Ringers and Psalm-singers, who enjoy nothing so much as to give each other a touch of their quality, and it is more than probable that was the case in the acceptance of this cartel. Shakspeare's genial enjoyment of humour, which, among all his rare qualities, shines so conspicuously, might, more than excusably, have drawn him into the society of men from whose very follies, by skilful alchemy, he would extract the rich materials of the world's delight.

"Here might the bold wit of some jovial friend
The first faint image of his Falstaff lend."

CHAPTER II.

THE LEGEND.—SHAKSPEARE'S ADVENTURE AT BIDFORD AND WHAT BEFEL HIM THERE.—HIS BIVOUAC UNDER THE CRAB TREE, AND THE COMPOSITION OF HIS EPIGRAMMATIC VERSE ON EIGHT SURROUNDING VILLAGES.

> "The day shall not be up so so soon as I,
> To try the fair adventure of to-morrow."

THE legend of the Crab Tree still preserved, and implicitly believed, in Stratford-on-Avon and the vicinity, may fairly be supposed to have occurred during the interval of Shakspeare leaving school and his marriage, of which period so few authenticated events have been handed down to us.

THE LEGEND.

In the glorious days of good Queen Bess the village of Bidford, on the Banks of the Warwickshire Avon, was noted for the illustrious bands called "Topers" and "Sippers." The "Topers" were the stouter of the two, and boldly challenged all England to contest with them in imbibing the nut-brown ale, for which Bidford especially was famous. Early one Whit Monday morning William Shakspeare, and a few of his right-merry boon companions, who had accepted the Topers' challenge, started for Bidford, and, arriving there, had the mortification to find that the challengers had that very morning gone to Evesham fair on a similar errand; at this disappointment they resolved to take up with the Sippers, who had remained at home, and whom they held in contempt.

Upon trial, however, the Stratfordians found themselves unequal to the encounter, and were obliged to retire whilst they still retained the partial use of their legs. The poet and his comrades had not retreated more than a mile from the famous hostelrie of the Falcon—at which their capabilities had been tested, ere they lay down and bivouacked, for the night, under the wide-spreading boughs of a thickly-blossomed Crab Tree.

Upon awaking in the morning Shakspeare's companions endeavoured to persuade him to renew the contest; but, probably foreseeing a second defeat, and knowing "Discretion is the better part of valour," he declined, and looking round, and pointing to the villages from which his adversaries had assembled, uttered the following epigram:—

> "Piping Pebworth, dancing Marston,
> Haunted Hillboro', hungry Grafton,
> Dodging Exhall, papist Wixford,
> Beggarly Broom, and drunken Bidford."

Which appellations the villages still retain, and ever after the tree was known far and near by the name of "Shakspeare's Crab Tree." Uncomplimentary as the designations undoubtedly are to some of these localities, it would be considered almost a species of blasphemy to doubt that Shakspeare was the author of them, so much do the inhabitants rejoice in the titles bestowed on their abodes.

Those who are not possessed of easy faith, and who do not believe the verse to be a Shaksperean fragment, should remember he had been drinking with the Sippers only: they may consider it paltry in character and will not recognise it as a genuine effusion of Avon's gifted bard; but, had he been carousing with the Topers, whose draughts were pottle-deep, we might have had a specimen of his powers in all the majesty of song; if it, indeed, be true that

> "A shallow draught intoxicates the brain,
> Whilst a deep potion sobers us again."

Upon a comparison of this legend with that of Charlecote Park, there does not appear any reason why the one should not be as worthy of credence as the other; both may be said to be referred to in his works, and the following observations may be considered to establish an important point. In the second part of "Henry the Fourth" the villages of this neighbourhood are familiarly alluded to; the scenes in the introduction to the "Taming of a Shrew" are laid before an ale-house at Wincote, and a tradition is still extant that it owes its origin to a joke practised by one of Sir Aston Cockayne's family, who were famous sportsmen of the olden time, and made the Falcon Inn, at Bidford, the centre of their hunting operations. Certainly the places are hamlets adjoining Stratford-on-Avon—as will be seen on reference to the accompanying map—it is the only scene in the whole of Shakspeare's plays which has direct reference to his own times; nor is it too great a stretch of imagination to suppose the bard was an eye-witness of the merriment it must have caused. The name of "Sly" is not yet extinct in this part of the country, but whether the parties bearing it are descendants of the redoubtable "Christopher," I have no pedigree to adduce; but their appearance gives unmistakable proofs of their consanguinity.

The biographers of Shakspeare are unable to account for his journey to London, except by maintaining it arose from his predilection for deer-stalking! if such was his habits it is probable that he was a customer of the "Fat ale-wife of Wincote," and that he might occasionally take a drop too much with his quondam friends the Topers of Bidford.

"Do you think because you are virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?
"Yes, by St. Anne, and ginger shall be hot in the mouth too."

CHAPTER III.

HEARSAY EVIDENCE OF THE INHABITANTS OF BIDFORD AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD.—THEIR IMPLICIT BELIEF IN THE LEGEND.—ITS ANTIQUITY.—THE HABITS OF SHAKSPEARE INDICATED BY A POEM PUBLISHED IN 1658.

> "All the neighbourhood from old records
> Of antique proverbs drawn from Whitsun lords,
> And their authority at Wakes, and Ales,
> With country precedents and old wives' tales,
> We bring you now."

In the autumn of 1822 I journeyed to Bidford, on a Shakspearean pilgrimage, in company with my lamented friend Captain James Saunders, a gentleman of great literary acquirements and antiquarian research, who had taken up his residence at Stratford-on-Avon from his enthusiastic admiration of Shakspeare, and employed the greatest part of his time in investigating the records of the corporation, in order to unravel the mystery which surrounds the early period of the poet's history. Among others he investigated the legend of the Crab Tree, and as his companion on that occasion, I sketched "The time-worn, lonely tree," and the eight villages that furnished competitors to Shakspeare and his Stratfordian companions on their memorable visit to Bidford.

Amongst those gentlemen, from whom information was elicited, was the Reverend Henry Holyoake, who, having been Rector of Bidford for many years, attested that so great was his parishioners' belief in the legendary account of the Crab Tree, that he had never heard its authen-

ticity questioned, nor did he think there could possibly be the slightest doubt about it.

He accompanied us to his friend Mr. Hurst, the "Sir Oracle" of Bidford, a fine, robust, country gentleman, somewhat "In the sere and yellow leaf," with "troops of friends, for whose delight he is a perpetual triumph, an everlasting bonfire light! who saves his friends' money in links and torches, walking with them in the night betwixt tavern and tavern; but the *ale* he has drank would have bought lights at the dearest chandlers in Europe." When our Reverend cicerone informed Mr. Hurst of our errand, that gentleman invited us to partake of his hospitality, facetiously adding, if that is your business here, "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart," or we shall lose our reputation; and a hearty welcome he gave us; indeed, so much so, that I began to fear he intended to make an example of us as his townsmen of yore had done of mine.

As one glass of his generous wine followed, the other, "Thick as post on post," he affirmed it could not hurt us; and however inclined to believe in his assertions, I began to feel unmistakable symptoms to the contrary. Our kind host said he could remember the legend as long as he could remember anything: his father used to talk about the jolly bouts with the Stratfordians: in his younger days he himself had often been at the Falcon, at Bidford, with "the old poet," meaning John Jordan, the author of "Welcomb Hills"—who used to recite one of his poems, written to commemorate Shakspeare's visit—in which he made it appear that the Avon's bard was as fond "Of a skin-full of drink" as any of themselves.

Mr. Hurst also gave a vivid account of Garrick's jubilee at Stratford-on-Avon, in 1769, in the pleasures of which he had participated. He related the anecdote of Christopher Sly—mentioned in the preceding chapter—and other exploits of Sir Aston Cockayne, and recited the following poem written by that worthy knight, published in 1658, and dedicated to Mrs. Clement Fisher, of Wincote:—

"Shakspeare, your Wincote ale hath much renowned;
That foxed a beggar that by chance was found,

Sleeping ; there needed not a word
To make him believe he was a lord,
But you affirm, and it seems most eager,
'Twill make a lord as drunk as any beggar :
Bid Norton brew such ale as Shakspeare fancies,
Did put Kit Sly into such lordly trances ;
And let us meet there for a fit of gladness,
And drink ourselves merry in sober sadness."

These doggerel lines, coupled with the fact that the Falcon Inn, at Bidford, was kept by Norton in Shakspeare's time, and for a great number of years afterwards, "Will help to thicken other proofs that do demonstrate thinly" the truth of the legend, and that it was the received opinion of the neighbourhood from Shakspeare's to the present day.

We then called upon Mrs. Ashwin, a communicative old lady, whose testimony fully corroborated that of Mr. Hurst; she added that her informant, who taught her the epigram on the villages, could remember it from the troublesome times of England, when the second king Charles addressed his followers from the hostelrie of the Falcon previously to the disastrous battle of Worcester; and as she related the bibulous exploits of the Topers and Sippers, the fire of youth lit up the eyes of this feeble octogenarian "As the spirit of the past came o'er her." She said, "The Bidfordians have never lost their character, for they are a thirsty lot even now ; nothing will ever alter them!" She had heard there had been formerly a kind of mock corporation there ; the Topers were considered the aldermen, and the Sippers the burgesses, and that it had existed for ages. Indeed, the corporation of Stratford-on-Avon, as far as regards sobriety, was little better at the commencement of the present century ; for I have seen—and I advert to the fact merely to show the probability of such practices—

"The justice,
With fair round belly, with good capon lined,"

carried home *à la* Falstaff in a buck basket, on the occasions of their feastings and drinkings, which were neither few or far between ; "I have

other reports by me, which, if I should set forth, some grave ancient would be out of charity with me."

We were further informed of the existence of the old sign of the Falcon, which, when it ceased to be an inn, was sold to a wheelwright at Broom; thither we repaired, and found it nailed up as a pictorial embellishment in his shop. Captain Saunders purchased it, and had it conveyed to Stratford. It is rudely painted, and, to use an heraldic phrase, is a falcon displayed *or* on a field *gules*, surmounted with the arms of the Skipworth family who were the then lords of the manor of Bidford.

I subjoin an extract from the British Magazine for June, 1762, No. 31, page 301, dated Stratford-on-Avon, June 7th, 1762.

" Alluding to mine host of the White Lion Inn he says, finding me a great admirer of Shakspeare, he took me on the road to a place called Bidford, and showed me in the hedge a Crab Tree, called " Shakspeare's Canopy," because under it our poet slept one night; for he, as well as Ben Jonson, loved a glass for the pleasure of society; and he, having heard much of the men of the village as deep drinkers and merry fellows, one day went over to Bidford to take a cup with them. He inquired of a shepherd for the Bidford drinkers, who replied they were absent, but the Sippers were at home, and, I suppose, continued the sheepkeeper, they will be sufficient for you: and so, indeed, they were. He was forced to take up his lodgings under that tree for some hours.

" ' Hushed with the buzzing night flies to his slumbers.'

" HENRY IV., PART 2.

" ' Enjoyed the honey-dew of sleep.'

" JULIUS CÆSAR."

There is another notice of the tradition of Shakspeare's Crab Tree, and the epigram on the villages as being long known in Warwickshire, published in the Gentleman's Magazine for December, 1794, Vol. 64, Part 2, page 1062.

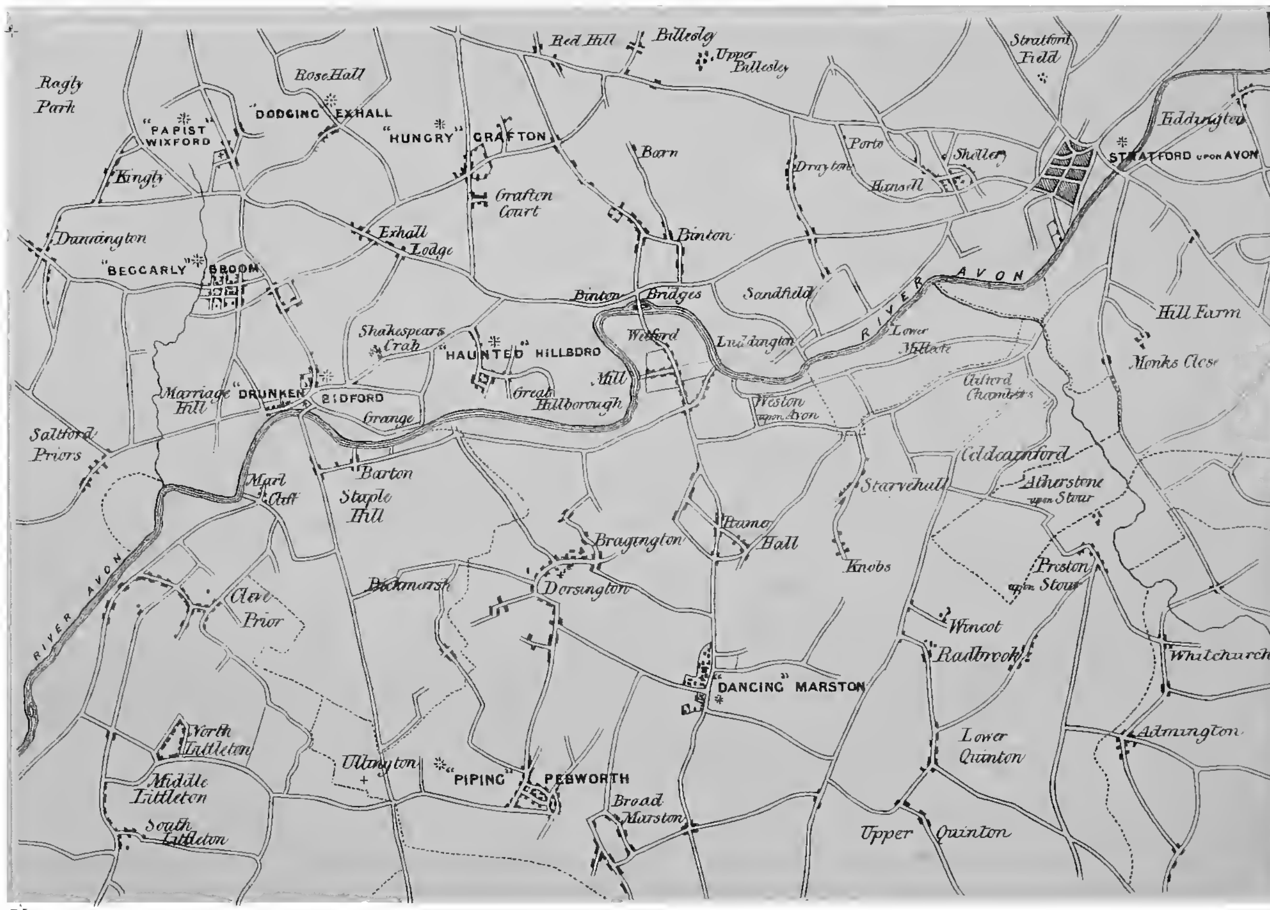
In Ireland's Warwickshire Avon, published towards the end of the last century, there is a similar account of the tradition, and the earliest representation of the Crab Tree I have seen (a wood cut), which is correct as it then appeared in 1795.

Dr. Drake, in his "Shakspeare and his Times, 1817," notices the existence of the legend, and expresses his conviction of its antiquity and Shaksperean origin.

Douglas Jerrold in his "Shilling Magazine" gives a pleasing and vivid relation of the tradition and of the manner in which Shakspeare's birth-day ought to be celebrated.

The fidelity with which the peasantry of the neighbourhood of Bidford recite the epigram is remarkable, and also how invariably they ascribe it to Shakspeare; thus, it appears, both the learned and unlearned have, for upwards of two hundred years, acknowledged their belief in the truth of

THE LEGEND OF THE CRAB TREE.



C. F Green, del et lith.

THE CRAB TREE AND ITS ENVIRONS.

CHAPTER IV.

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF SHAKSPEARE'S CRAB TREE.

"Revisit'st thou the time-worn, lonely tree
Whose rugged trunk is sacred still to thee?
Beneath whose branches, thick with blossoms spread,
Thou laid'st one summer's night thy weary head,
Whilst Mab despatched her little elfin crew
Around the heath in search of morning dews,
Some tripp'd the bank, and some the briery dell,
Or scooped the stone, or shook the blue hare-bell,
From cup of acorn or of ruby hips
To pour the cool drops o'er thy parching lips."

"Here fairies by moonlight dance round his green bed
For hallow'd the turf is which pillow'd his head."

GARRICK.

In a valley of beautiful and varied scenery, full of repose, and rich in verdant loveliness, with opening vistas of surpassing beauty—the Cotswold Hills in the distance, and nearer, bold Breedon, looking frowningly upon the Vale of Evesham, through which sweeps the "Soft-flowing Avon," glittering like molten silver between the willows on its sedgy banks; five short miles from Stratford, one from Bidford, and a few hundred paces from the river, on the then uninclosed roadside, grew a Crab Tree, whose gnarled trunk and giant size bespoke the growth of

centuries, and which tradition has uniformly associated with the name of Shakspeare. The humble dwellers of the neighbourhood (probably some of the drinking party) conferred upon it the appellation of "Shakspeare's Crab Tree," from its having sheltered him and his companions from the dews of night on an occasion when a carousal having disqualified them from proceeding further, they laid themselves down to sleep under its thickly blossomed branches.

My earliest recollection of the Crab Tree was about the year 1814, at which time it was frequently called "Shakspeare's Canopy;" it was regarded with almost superstitious veneration by the peasantry of the neighbourhood, and was then rich in foliage and fruit. The autumnal winds of 1816 blew off several of its stalwart boughs, and year after year it suffered equally from the effects of time and the depredations of unthinking visitors. For several subsequent years it remained as depicted in the annexed sketch—made in 1823—when only a few leaves appeared on a single twig, which ultimately died off before the autumn, and left only

> "A rotten tree
> That cannot so much as blossom yield."

The remains of its decayed trunk and roots were carefully removed to Bidford Grange on the 4th of December, 1824.

The oak which concealed the second Charles was for a long time venerated by the adherents of the House of Stuart, yet that must fall into insignificance when compared with the tree that over-canopied the greatest poet nature ever produced, for, when all records of the monarch shall have passed away, the fame of the bard will not have attained the zenith of its glory. The celestial light of Shakspeare's knowledge will continue to illuminate the darkest corners of the earth, as it now irradiates both hemispheres with its effulgent rays.

> "Though Albion's isle may boast thy lore,
> Yet lives thy spirit on Columbia's shore."

It has often excited surprise that Shakspeare has not introduced more frequent records in his works of incidents which occurred to him in his nonage, and with such accuracy as to indicate their undoubted origin; those noticed in the second chapter are certainly referable to the neighbourhood of Stratford, and parties well acquainted with its vicinity recognise the allusions to it, which distinctly show that he well knew each bosky bourne and verdant dell in the locality of the famous

CRAB TREE.

CHAPTER V.

PIPING PEBWORTH.

> "As poetry and piping are cousin-germans,
> So piping and playing are of great affinity."

I RESOLVED to make a pedestrian visit to Pebworth, that I might stroll leisurely through some of those scenes from which Shakspeare has unquestionably derived his earliest ideas of rural imagery and rustic life. My route was over Bidford Bridge, along the ancient Roman road called "Icknield Street," and for some part of the way lay in sight of the Avon, fancifully winding through the wide and fertile Vale of Evesham, sometimes disappearing among groves, or beneath its own green banks; and anon breaking out into full view, in silvery eddies sweeping round a slope of meadow land, and then losing itself in the distant line of azure, undulating hills.

After pursuing the road for about two miles I ascended Staple Hill, which commands an extensive view of the Cotswold Range—strongly contrasting the Warwickshire side of the Avon, and indicating, notwithstanding the improvement of two centuries, that rarest Will

> "Was no stranger here in Gloucestershire,
> Whose high, wild hills, and rough, uneven ways
> Draw out our miles and make them wearisome."

At Bickmarsh I turned off to the left into a footpath which led along the borders of fields and under hedgerows by Leza Barn—taking the windmill for a landmark, until I came to Dorsington Lane, at the end of which lies Pebworth, which is situated on a gentle eminence. It is a pretty little village, containing about two hundred cottages, principally

C. F. Green, del. et lith.

"PIPING" PEBWORTH.

built of stone, covered with thatch or Gloucestershire stone-slate, most of them having trim gardens, bright with flowering shrubs, or clustering vines overhanging the doorways, while the substantial residences of the yeomen, with well filled rickyards, give ample testimony of their abundance.

The church, which is dedicated to St. Peter, stands on the summit of a hill, and is a humble specimen of early Gothic architecture; having a square, embattled tower, as will be seen in the annexed view.

On the south side of the church stands an antique chapel, doubtless part of a still more ancient edifice; it is separated from the body of the church by four gothic arches supported on octagonal pillars. There is a gallery at the west end for the choir, under which is an ancient font: and in the chancel is a piscina, proving that the sacred structure was erected previously to the Reformation; it also contains several monuments to the memory of the Bonners, and the Shakels, whose descendants occupy an important position in the village. The Reverend James Fowler, the worthy pastor, resides in an unostentatious vicarage, separated merely from the churchyard by the road.

Soon after the Reformation the parish of Pebworth became celebrated for its choir, whose fame spread so far that their services were frequently required at Worcester Cathedral, in which diocese it is situated. The parish clerk, who, in his everyday occupations, followed "Bottom's" profession (that of a weaver), talked very loquaciously of his ancestors having filled the office for more than a century, and became most mournfully pathetic when he eulogized the choir then fallen into disuse owing to the late Vicar preferring congregational to choral singing. From the manner in which he lauded the vocal powers of the defunct choir the suggestion naturally arises that no bullfinches ever *piped* so melodiously as they had done; so that, without the reputation they might have acquired for their skill on the *pipe* and tabor, their proficiency in sacred melody, doubtless, earned for their native village the designation of

"PIPING PEBWORTH."

CHAPTER VI.

DANCING MARSTON.

"We heard that England
Were busied with a Whitsun morris-dance."

PROCEEDING in a northerly direction from Pebworth along the rough, dirty lane for a mile or so, then turning to the right "Jog on, jog on the footpath way, and merrily hent the stile a"—crossing the rich pasture lands, studded with lofty, umbrageous elms, casting a beautiful park-like appearance on the sylvan scene, I came to a narrow track leading to a village, whose *aliases* would alone render it notorious, it having been known to ancient and modern "Dogberrys" as Dry Marston, Marston Sicca, and Long Marston, when it does not rejoice in the merrier appellation of "Dancing Marston." This parish is situate in Kiftsgate Hundred, in the county of Gloucester, four miles south-west of Stratford, and about a mile and a-half north-east of Pebworth. Placed on a level plain between two streams, which in rainy seasons overflow on all sides, the village looks as though it was constructed on an island in a quagmire of mud, and wanted helping from the mire and dirt.

The church, evidently coeval with the Norman conquest, has but the humblest pretensions to architectural beauty; it is surmounted by a low, embattled bell tower, the whole of which is ensconced in roughcast. In the churchyard are several tombs of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, some of which are elaborately carved, but the stealing hand of time has quite obliterated the inscriptions. Descending a few steps into the church I found it gloomy and monotonous, with little to attract attention, except a few scarcely legible brasses and inscriptions on the floor. A

C. F. Green, del et lith.

"DANCING" MARSTON.

large freestone font occupies an important position in a structure of such limited proportions. The living is a rectory, in the deanery of Campden, and was two centuries ago worth £120 a-year, besides its first fruits, tenths, procurations, synodals, and pentecostals; doubtless, ere this, it has ripened into a "fat" living, if the comfortable appearance of the rectory forms a criterion of judgment.

I waited on the clergyman to make a few recondite inquiries, and was ushered into the drawing-room, where I found a quiet, placid gentleman with a feeble voice, who said he had never ascertained to what Saint the church had been dedicated, nor why the village was called "Dancing Marston." As I could glean nothing, new or old, from this source, I bowed myself out of his presence, and gave up the investigation, with the patience of a baffled antiquary, "Marry and Amen," said I, "here endeth my research!"

John Cooper gave £300, in the year 1643, to establish a free school in this village, the money was accordingly laid out in the purchase of a house and lands, the proceeds of which are expended in the education of the boys of this and the adjoining parishes; but if the now large sum be properly dispensed, and the youthful villagers retain their terpsichorean propensities, they should be wise, merry, and happy. Here I found about two hundred cottages of a neat and cleanly appearance, besides several large farmhouses.

The old Manor-house, belonging to the Tomes's family, in whose possession it has been for centuries, afforded an asylum to our second King Charles, after the disastrous battle of Worcester:—"The king, disguised in a grey suit, rode on a horse before Mrs. Lane through the Parliamentary forces, and took up his quarters at Mr. Tomes's house. Here the king, who had assumed the name of Will Jackson, being in the kitchen in pursuance of his disguise, the cookmaid busy in providing supper for her master's friends, desired him to wind up the jack; in obedience to her orders he attempted it, but hit not the right way, which made the maid in some passion ask, 'What countryman are you that you know not how to wind up a jack?' Will Jackson answered very satis-

factorily, 'I am a poor tenant's son of Colonel Lane in Staffordshire, we seldom have roast meat, but when we have we don't use a jack;' which in some measure assuaged the maid's indignation." The identical jack still retains its position, together with some spears which were used in that lamentable but interesting period of English history.

In this village there existed, time out of mind, a band of morris-dancers, who were wont to attend the wakes, fairs, and merry meetings, for many miles around. Fantastically decked with ribbons, with bells attached to their legs, they were accompanied by a tabor and piper, who, with a "Motley fool," were a source of great amusement to their rustic neighbours. So recently as 1830 they visited Shakspeare's jubilee at Stratford-on-Avon; since that period they have been discountenanced by their wealthier neighbours; as there are but "Few gentlemen now-a-days" like Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who

"Delight in masks and revels altogether."

It is to be regretted that, in the middle of the nineteenth century of the Christian era, those joyous holydays and festivals, which our English bards were so delighted to look upon, are seldom or ever observed, for

"Then the merry bells ring round,
And the jocund rebecks sound
To many a youth and many a maid
Dancing in the chequered shade;
Young and old come forth to play
On a sunshine holyday."

"Alas, and alack-a-day," these poor villagers now rarely or never make their wonted excursions through the country round, or exercise their fantastic dancing at home, so greatly are the innocent recreations of the poor curtailed; but, however "Short and simple the annals" of these poor morris-dancers might have been, it was, doubtless, they who gained for their native village the designation of

"DANCING MARSTON."

C. F. Green, del. et. lith.

"HAUNTED" HILLBORO.

CHAPTER VII.

HAUNTED HILLBORO'.

"It may be only on enchanted ground
It might be merely thought's expansion;
But in the spirit, or the flesh, I found
An old and haunted mansion.

"For over all there hung a cloud of fear,
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,
Hillboro's haunted!"

LEAVING Dancing Marston by another narrow lane, passing through Dorsington and Welford Pasture, and crossing the Avon at Bidford Grange, then by an almost unfrequented footpath, I came suddenly upon Haunted Hillboro', a large stone manor-house, dating as far back as King Stephen's reign, at which time it was in the possession of Peter de Strodley and Henry de Montfort, who granted ten acres of land and a fishing house on the Avon, with free passage through the floodgates, to the monks of Bordesley Abbey.

The great antiquity of this manor, its secluded situation, and its appearance, alike are highly favourable to the supposition of its being haunted. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, almost every old manor-house in a romantic and melancholy situation had its old familiar ancestral spirit, particularly if any of its former occupants had met with a violent or sudden death. Should such a catastrophe ever have occurred, the house was certain to have a grim mark set upon it as the undoubted

habitation of a ghost, and some whose superstitious fears had wrought more highly on their excited imagination, would declare they had seen or heard the inhabitants performing their usual avocations in their midnight visitations; "Becoming borrowers of the night for a dark hour or twain."

In those ages, the members of a family would congregate around the fire relating stories of fairies, ghosts, and murders, till

> "On every lip a speechless horror dwelt,
> On every brow the burden of affliction,
> The old ancestral spirit knew and felt
> The house's malediction."

When King James's "Demonology" first appeared in print, it gave a great impetus to all classes to express their open belief in supernatural agency; it was the surest way to royal favour, and if all England did *not* believe it, they *ought*, out of their loyalty for "This wizard of the north," to do so.

I braved the ban, entered the house, and was shown into a spacious room, which served "For parlour, kitchen, and hall;" a bright wood fire was blazing away at one end of the apartment, shedding an air of comfort, and added cheerfulness to the prevailing neatness and order which bespoke the superintendence of a notable housewife. I had not waited long before a plump, little, bustling woman presented herself, to whom I communicated the object of my visit. She seemed delighted with an opportunity of having a little gossip, but regretted that she could only refer me to Shakspeare's plays for a solution of my queries; and, though it was always called "Haunted Hillboro'," she repeatedly assured me there was now no reason for the appellation. Thus, communing with "Bald disjointed chat," I lingered longer than I should have done, for the last ray of sunshine had departed before I left the house, the bats were flitting about in the dim twilight ere I had finished the annexed sketch, and the moon had risen to lend her lustre to declining day. Whether haunted or not, there stands a fair stone manor-house, embowered in lofty elms on Avon's willowy banks, its principal features

unchanged from the great poet's time, with neither highway nor by-way near it to trench upon its sombre peace. Secluded from the haunts of the living, there the shadowy dead may revisit the "Pale glimpses of the moon" unnoticed and unseen.

In this advanced age let us not carp at every romantic tale, but take the poet at his word, and call the manor by its ancient name of

"HAUNTED HILLBORO'."

CHAPTER VIII.

HUNGRY GRAFTON.

"As hungry as the sea."

It was difficult to find the way from so sequestered a spot as Haunted Hillboro' without a guide: traversing the scarcely distinguishable foot-paths I was obliged to use a little astronomical knowledge, and endeavour to find a north-west passage, making my way but slowly, looking diligently for gaps and stiles in the high hedgerows, and now and then finding one with a plank thrown across a deep ditch, whilst a stream crept silently along, hiding itself among rushes, hazel and blackberry bushes. Farther on is a tract of land called Crunhill-leas, where I was almost bewildered by the numerous tracts that intersect it, formed by sheep as well as by man, those of the former being quite as well defined, if not as judiciously chosen. I soon found my way into the Bidford road, and returned to my hostelrie for the night.

In the morning I proceeded for about two miles amidst "The hateful reek of limekilns," and arrived at "Hungry Grafton," within the hundred of Barlichway, in the county of Warwick, and containing in its parish the townships of Arden's Grafton and Hillboro'.

In ancient times it is said to have belonged to the Knight Templars, and that is why it is sometimes called Temple Grafton; in the earliest records it is written both Græstone and Græveston, probably from the

C. F. Green, del et lith

"HUNGRY" GRAFTON.

bushes which abound on the uneven surface of the parish. Although the greatest attention has of late years been paid to the cultivation of the soil in this locality it is still *hungry* and sterile ; yet, if nature has denied to it that fertility which is so manifest in the surrounding hamlets, its geological advantages are more than equivalent to those "Upon the manor born," for it is situated on a blue lias formation, which furnishes employment to the inhabitants in working the quarries and burning the stone into lime. There are several farmhouses in the village besides the cottages, which have a clean and neat appearance, and are constructed principally of stone. The parish contains a population of upwards of four hundred, and covers an extent of one thousand and thirty acres.

Antiquity hunters, on arriving in strange villages, generally pay an early visit to the church, as they there become acquainted with every particular of ancient or local interest. Thither I repaired with more than usual anxiety, and found it standing on a little knoll of ground, adjoining the high road ; it is a humble cruciform structure, with a low bell tower at the west end, as will be seen by the annexed print. It is dedicated to St. Andrew : no indigenous yew, nor any kind of tree, grows in this "Hungry churchyard" to throw its cooling shade over the latticed windows of the church, or on the mouldering remains of poor mortality, but the whole is surrounded by a stone wall, which looks as if the icy jaws of death had swallowed the last semblance of vitality.

I entered the low porch, expecting to step into the regions of antiquity, and find some cross-legged effigies of the Knight Templars, looking like fossil remains just exhumed from some neighbouring quarry, but none are left "To guard their couch of darkness;" "All are removed from their fixed beds of lime," and not a wreck left on the sands of time to show that such things were. Disappointed in the church—from which I had expected so much—I explored the village, in the hope of finding some creature comforts, and anxiously peering for a sign announcing "Good accommodation for man and beast," or, "The Traveller's Rest," or even, "The Traveller's Hope," but in vain, no such happy announcement was to be found amongst the whole community. If hungry you go thither,

hungry you must remain, unless "Your cause doth strike some heart with pity," and you are hospitably relieved.

If what is here adduced is not sufficient to convince my readers of the correctness of Shakspeare's appellation, let him apply to the parson of the parish, who, although he rejoices in the munificent income of £93 per annum, *is* an absentee, and he will, doubtless, give his opinion in unison with that of Avon's bard, and call it

"HUNGRY GRAFTON."

C F Green, del. et. lith.

"DODGING" EXHALL.

CHAPTER IX.

DODGING EXHALL.

> "To the young men send humble treaties: *dodge*,
> And palter in the shifts of lowness."

ABOUT two miles from Hungry Grafton, in a westerly direction along the footpath, across uncultivated fields thickly interspersed with stunted crab trees and hawthorn bushes, then over the ridge of a steep hill, and through several corn fields, I arrived at the village of "Dodging Exhall," or, as it is sometimes called, "Dudgeon Exhall." The cottages here seem completely in each others way, like grain that had been sown broadcast, and surely there must have been great engineering difficulties in constructing roads to each of them.

I wandered about this apparently deserted village without discovering any signs of life, save that in a distant field I saw three women working; as I approached them I thought I had found the identical "Weird Sisters," for they were

> "So wither'd, and so wild in their attire;
> They look'd not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
> And yet were on't."

I went towards them, pondering whether, like their great originals, they could reveal the past, if not the future, and inquired why the village was called Dodging Exhall. The aged crones stared at each other with a gaze of wild astonishment, which seemed to imply they knew not; nor could I elicit any information whatever from "These imperfect speakers."

Surely, thought I, if these are a specimen of the inhabitants it must be *Dudgeon* Exhall.

Retracing my steps I perceived a man turning one of the angles of the lane; he was advanced in life, and of a form that had once been athletic but was then somewhat bowed by time, perhaps by care; there was something in his appearance that indicated intelligence, although his sunburnt, furrowed countenance seemed the title-page of tribulation. I entered into conversation with him, and found he had been the parish clerk for forty years; I requested to view the church, and whilst he went for the keys, strolled into the consecrated enclosure, and inspected the frail memorials of the dead. There I was particularly struck with the frequency of the name of Griffin; whether the name was analagous to the disposition of those who had borne it I could not divine, possibly so, for I found one who might be made of gentler clay, poor John Lamb, who had prematurely "Shuffled off this mortal coil," as though unable to live with "Monsters dire," who had hitherto been supposed to exist only in the fabled past.

The arrival of the parish clerk put an end to my idle speculations, for his assurances convinced me there was not a griffin, whether hippogriff or man, then living in the parish.

We approached the church, which is (as will be seen by the accompanying sketch) a small plain building; it is dedicated to St. Giles, was built in Henry the First's time, having a small bell tower of wood, and a low porch, constructed of the like material, covered with ivy and green with moss, the accumulation of successive years. We descended into the church, the door of which grated harshly on its hinges, as though in *dudgeon* at being disturbed on a week day, when it is opened once only on a Sunday. All here seems to be associated with long established usage, for the interior does not appear to have been whitewashed since the Reformation The robins have left traces of many a winter residence, and spiders enjoy their ancestral possessions undisturbed, as there are the remains of many a vagrant fly strangled in their meshes; all is peace, dim, fading, but serene; even the gorgeous sun itself seems to have lost

all energy, for its rays struggle through windows dimmed by the dust of ages, and the broad eye of day sheds at best but a tolerable twilight on this sequestered spot. The church was formerly a chapelrie of Evesham Abbey; the benefice is a rectory, and, with the curacy of Wixford attached, the income amounts to £400 a-year; the Rev. Hugh Carlton is the present incumbent; whilst the parish clerk rejoices in the munificent stipend of fifty shillings for his annual services.

I accompanied this humble official to his dwelling, situated within a few hundred paces of the church, on ground about ten feet above the level of the lane; it is a thatched cottage, has a small strip of garden, with little flower beds, while a honeysuckle hangs over the door and sends its delicate perfume into this primitive abode. The principal apartment is a low whitewashed room, with the usual appendages of a labourer's home—all scrupulously clean; before the fire was the companion of his cares, providing their frugal meal, whilst the daughter, a delicate looking girl, occupied herself in ironing. From this little group I had hoped to derive some information, but as pebbles make a stream diverge into different channels, even at the fountain head, so was it here; for George Hunt (that being the clerk's name), maintained that the epithet attached to the hamlet was "Dudgeon," whilst his daughter modestly intimated that it was "Dodging" Exhall, for she had seen it in a printed book, so thus again doubt and mystery arise, similar to those which veil the poet's history.

Under these circumstances I leave it to my readers to determine by which of the two appellations it must be called; and, whilst unwilling to interfere with the right of private judgment, I can not doubt that gallantry will join the pretty village lass and declare in favour of

"DODGING EXHALL."

CHAPTER X.

POPISH WIXFORD.

> "With twenty popish tricks and ceremonies
> I have seen them faithful to observe."

I PROCEEDED in a westerly direction, accompanied by my cicerone, George Hunt, who, like his reverend rector, is a pluralist, along a narrow ravine overhung with hawthorn bushes and crab trees, whose antique roots are washed bare by Haybrook, which runs along the side. A wide opening of the road here reveals a beautiful landscape, disclosing farmhouses and cottages embowered in well wooded and highly cultivated lands, the property of the Marquis of Hertford; then crossing the brow of the hill through a number of corn fields, we came again into a deep, hollow lane, and, turning a sudden corner, arrived at Wixford Church, a small structure almost eclipsed by a colossal yew tree.

The parish of Wixford belonged to the renowned Guy, Earl of Warwick, before the Norman conquest: the village is situated on the banks of the river Arrow, two miles from Alcester, one from Exhall, and seven from Stratford-on-Avon. The church is of very limited proportions, with a small bell turret at the west end, indicated by the accompanying sketch. It is dedicated to St. Milburgh; on the south side is a chapel, of much larger dimensions than the church itself, dedicated to St. John, from which it may be inferred that the chapel of the

C. F Green, del et lith

"POPISH" WIXFORD.

Evangelist has taken the church of poor St. Milburgh under its protection.

Entering the sacred edifice, "Far from the busy haunts of men," every restless passion seems soothed into repose, arising, perhaps, from a consciousness that all must soon be mingled with the dust; the very shadow of death appears to rest upon the mildewed walls, stained and tinted by weather and by time; its mouldering monuments; its dark oak paneling, all reverend with the gloom of by-gone years, are marvellously fitted for the abode of solemn meditation. Some of the ancient symbols of Romanism which escaped destruction at the Reformation still remain; the confessionals yet divide the church from the chapel, and the raised steps to the altar carry back the memory to the past. In the chapel is a tomb curiously embellished and inlaid with brasses, the prevailing ornament being the human foot; it was erected to the memory of Thomas De Crew and Juliana his wife, A.D. 1400. There are several others of lesser importance which are fast mouldering to decay. The chapel is kept in perpetual repair by the Throckmorton family, who, until recently, resided at the ancient baronial residence, Coughton Court, but now at Buckland, and who, with a considerable number of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood, still adhere to the Roman Catholic faith. In one of the chancel windows, where it had lain time-out-of-mind covered with its kindred dust, I saw a relic of poor humanity, a *tibia* covered with parasitical ossifications, sufficient to prove if the former possessor was not a saint he must have been a martyr—at least "To the ills that flesh is heir to"—and, perhaps, quite as worthy of being canonized as many others which in more celebrated shrines abound; for why should not poor "Popish Wixford" have a sainted relic when it has so little else to recommend it?

The Protestant reformation was a great conservator of saints' days to their rightful owners, when each new canonization was obliged to rob the former possessor of the honours of his day; as every new interment in the churchyard deprives the previous occupant of the quiet repose of the grave. Alas! thought I, whilst contemplating this remnant of poor

extinct mortality again brought to light, how were you cuffed and buffeted in this world, and then you could not find a sanctuary even in the grave! Silence and oblivion, like the waves of time, have closed upon your fate, and no one can now tell the story of your sufferings or your end.

The lands of this parish in ancient times belonged to the Priory of Alcester and the monks of Evesham; the canons of Kenilworth had to pay forty-six shillings per annum, and cause mass to be performed in this chapel three times a-week, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday; which, doubtless, gave rise to the application to this parish of the epithet of

"POPISH WIXFORD."

C. F. Green, del. et. lith.

"BEGGARLY" BROOM.

CHAPTER XI.

BEGGARLY BROOM.

"Methinks they are exceeding poor, and bare to beggary."

I HAD a delightful walk of about two miles in a southerly direction from Popish Wixford, principally across the fields and over a wood-crowned steep, from which there is a beautiful prospect of the princely demesne of Ragley Park, the seat of the Marquis of Hertford, and the substantial homesteads of Kingley, Pophills, Morehall, with the river Arrow, which at Broom turns the mill-wheel, and, rushing across the dam, "Gurgling its way over the stony bosom of the ford," takes its sinuous course through the verdant meadows until it falls into the Avon at Salford Priors.

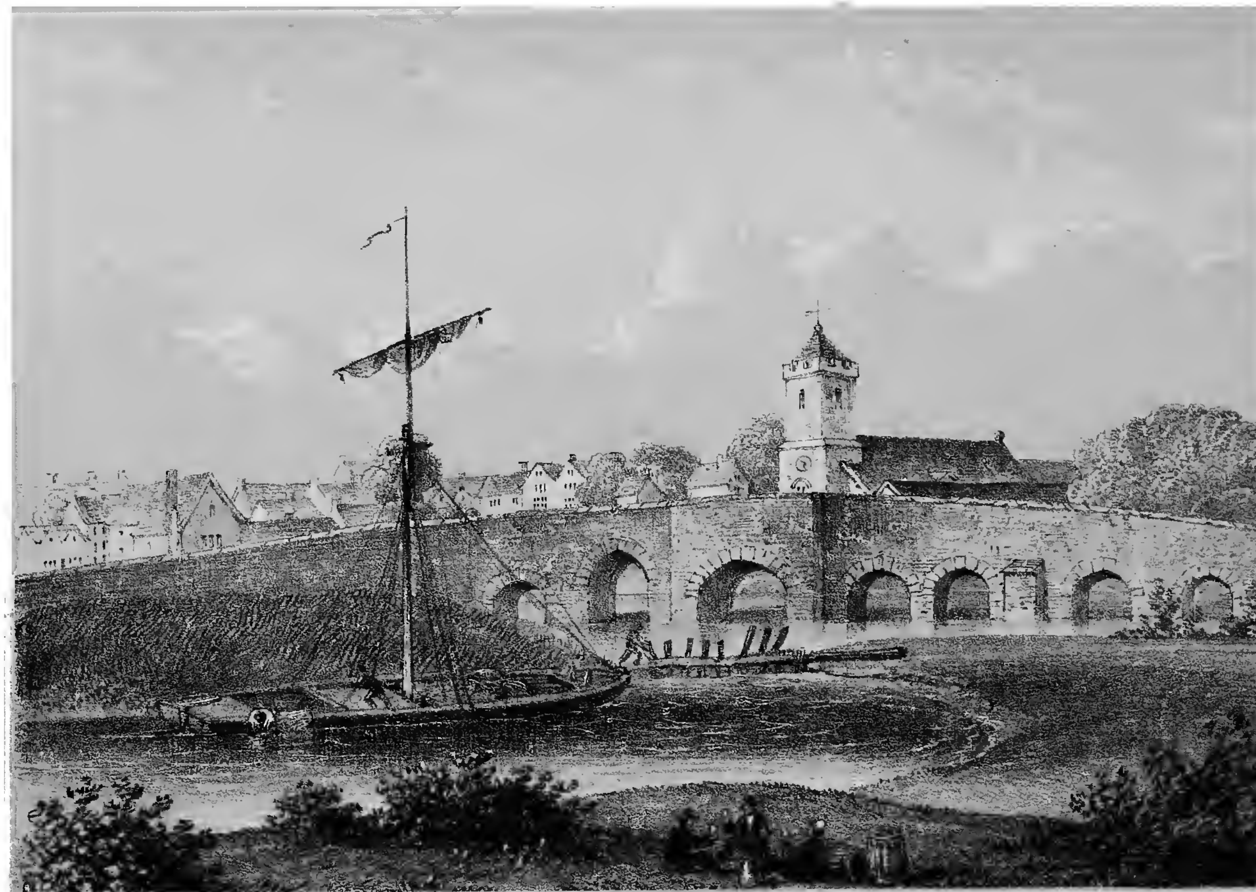
I sauntered about the village, looking for an object for a sketch; and, but for the mill, this would have been a task of considerable difficulty, as there is no church or other building of importance there, "The rest is so forlorn and beggarly." Broom, doubtless, derives its name from the pretty flowering shrub which grows abundantly in the neighbourhood.

In days of yore, Broom belonged to Evesham Abbey; it is now a hamlet attached to Bidford parish, and contains about four hundred inhabitants, many of whom retain their primitive habits and occupations, such as pedlars, razor grinders, renovators of chair bottoms, and other petty trades. There are several farmhouses built of framed timber and wattles, and covered with tiles; many of the cottages are constructed of mud with thatched roofs, some of which are in a sadly dilapidated con-

dition, with no other flooring than the bare ground. Since Shakspeare's time, "The world hath lived in deeds two thousand years;" yet here a complete antithesis presents itself—the *statu quo* in the world's progression—like to a blot on the fair face of the county which all around abounds with fertility and plenty.

Whether the appellation of "Beggarly" was originally given from the wretched condition of the village, the inert habits of the population, or from both, it is impossible accurately to determine; but it now thoroughly deserves the cognomen it has so long retained of

"BEGGARLY BROOM."



C. F. Green, del et lith:

"DRUNKEN" BIDFORD.

CHAPTER XII.

DRUNKEN BIDFORD.

"'Tis no matter, I'll never be drunk whilst I live again, but in honest, civil, godly company, for this trick—if I be drunk, I'll be drunk with those that have the fear of God, and not with drunken knaves."

THE moody reflections occasioned by the forlorn condition of the village I had just quitted were soon dispelled, as I became wrapt in admiration of the glorious sun, shedding its golden rays upon the foliage of the umbrageous elms in the fields through which I passed, in that delightful hour, when

"The departing sunbeam of the west
Kissed, with a smile, his Avon's virgin stream."

A merry chime from the old grey tower of Bidford church, looming in the distance, gave hopeful presage of the hearty welcome which awaited me from the sturdy sons of Bacchus. "Shall I not take mine ease in mine inn?" arose in my mind, as I sought refreshment and repose at the White Lion, adjoining the bridge, where, after partaking of a substantial repast, and refreshing myself with a draught of nut-brown ale, I came to the conclusion that the Bidfordians had not lost the art of brewing.

Having the prospect of a long, dull evening before me, I resolved to explore the village, and ascertain whether the old "Falcon" was still in existence. "Who knows," thought I, "but I may light upon some legendary traces of old Norton, 'The bully-rock' of Shakspeare, and

his jolly guests; at any rate there will be the pleasure of treading the halls once vocal with the mirth of the bard, and the madcap roysterers who dared to encounter the redoubtable Topers and Sippers." The resolution was no sooner made than put in execution, and anon I found myself wending my way towards that ancient region of wit and ale, the Falcon.

> "Thou most beauteous inn,
> Why should hard-favoured grief be lodged in thee,
> When triumph is become an alehouse guest?"

Alas! how sadly is the scene changed, for "The Falcon is no longer towering in his pride of place," but is converted into the poorhouse.

It is a large stone building, in the early Tudor style of architecture, with lofty gables, and stone-shafted windows. Remaining as it does entirely in its original state, it may be considered a fair specimen of country inns of the mediæval age It occupies a considerable area of ground, having an enclosed court yard, with an open gallery on three sides, which, whilst it afforded communication to the upper rooms on ordinary occasions, gave ample space on festive days for spectators to enjoy cockfighting, bear-baiting, and other similar amusements of the Elizabethan age. After examining the exterior of the ancient hostelrie, I found my way to a lateral entrance up a flight of steps, and was received by the matron, who, with much civility and communicativeness, showed me over the house, which required but little alteration to adapt it to its present purpose.

The great room on the western side is the one in which it is said Shakspeare tested the potative capabilities of the "Sippers." It is a large whitewashed apartment, with an ample, old-fashioned fireplace, capable of admitting within its jambs a knot of crones, on a winter's eve, circling around the fire. All the original furniture had long since disappeared except a massive dining table, around which a score of elderly, indigent men were seated, taking their repast. My inquiries seemed to arouse to a state of consciousness an ambiguous looking man, who had sunk into

pensive meditation over the remains of a basin of soup. This person, named George, might have been lineally descended from one of the veritable Topers, for his present appearance resembled a dissolving view of the valiant Bardolph, as an ashy whiteness was stealing over the still glowing embers of his once rubicund nose, probably arising from a change of the quality of his potations in his new abode. Suddenly breaking from his dark reverie, he assured me, in a confidential whisper, that *Master* Shakspeare had rubbed his shins against the legs of that table many a time, and that there was nothing else "antyke" in the house. Encouraged by my attention to his remarks, he ventured to relate many anecdotes of Shakspeare, which, as he observed, are not set down in printed books, although they pass current enough in Bidford.

In the twilight of the evening, and in the hurry of my investigation, I should have forgotten him of the Bardolph nose, who accompanied us to the door, but, as I was about to depart, he heaved a deep sigh, and though I did not see a tear trembling in his eye, there was a spasmodic contraction of the upper lid, then, as he slyly extended his hand from under the skirts of his coat; unseen by the matron, I slipped a small coin in it, and departed with his hearty benediction and the courtesying of the smiling dame.

I had passed the churchyard, and was slowly wending on, when a deep reverie into which I had fallen was disturbed by one of those honest bursts of laughter that generally proceed from that Bacchanalian temple, an inn. On looking up, I found it the sign of the Boot; the house had been recently encased in brickwork, and an embattled parapet gave it a ludicrous appearance. I entered, with the view of finding my way into the apartment to take a peep at the party who seemed so merry, but was met by the landlord, who, seeing I was a guest of higher pretensions, wished me to go into the parlour; but, following the bent of my inclination, I proceeded into the kitchen, which every one must know is the favourite resort of the middle and lower order of travellers in agricultural districts. The party consisted of several pig dealers, a fat, burly cow doctor,

"Whose black eye from a recent scuffle,
Seems he had boxed without the muffle,"

and a tailor, the veritable shadow of a man, from the Emerald Isle, with a few of the usual attendants and hangers-on.

They were seated round a bright fire, eclipsing the flickering light of two or three candles that were dotted about, illuminating the kitchen and settling in mellow radiance on the flitches of bacon which were suspended from the ceiling. A momentary pause in the merriment ensued upon my entrance, but it was speedily renewed by the tailor continuing his details respecting the Teetotallers who had attempted to establish *their heretical doctrines* in Bidford. As he related their adventures, and their ultimately giving up their attempt as hopeless, his hearers were convulsed with laughter, and finally this goodly company joined in a requiem over the defunct body of maudlin Teetotallers, proving to demonstration the truthfulness of my venerable friend, Mrs. Ashwin's remark, that "They are a thirsty lot even now."

As I was about returning to mine inn, I perceived a great bustle at the public-house opposite, which was used as the excise office; thither I repaired, and, on entering the parlour, found it filled with robust, portly persons, all furnished with some kind of evening potation, and most of them with pipes, sending forth such volumes of smoke as rendered it difficult to discover the features of the guests across the room. They consisted of the "Bully-rocks" and maltsters of the town and neighbourhood, who had come to pay their taxes. The gist of the conversation was the hardships they had to endure to pay such an iniquitous impost as a tax upon their drink, although it required a great stretch of imagination to suppose that they were hardly dealt with. I left this meeting, believing that they and the clouds of smoke would clear away in the morning.

Bidford was formerly a market town of considerable note; it is within the Stratford-on-Avon division of the Hundred of Barlichway, and is an extensive parish, containing three thousand two hundred and forty acres, besides the hamlets of Barton, Broom, and Marlclift. It is situated on the northern bank of the river Avon, whose importance to the

town was formerly very great, for the extramission of inland produce and the importation of coals and merchandize. The ancient Roman road, called "Icknield Street," passes over the Avon at Bidford bridge, "Whose wearisome, but needful length, gives indication of floods," to which the low lands on the Gloucestershire side are subject. From the meadow adjoining I made the annexed sketch. The village consists, principally, of one long, irregular street, running nearly parallel with the river; the houses are chiefly built of limestone, interspersed with a few gable-framed timber tenements, having gardens and orchards sloping to the banks of the Avon. The church is dedicated to St. Lawrence, and was recently rebuilt, the tower only remaining in its original state. The benefice is a vicarage worth two hundred and thirteen pounds per annum, and belonged to the crown as early as the time of Edward the Confessor.

I now conclude these remarks in the full persuasion that I have proved to demonstration the truth of Shakspeare's epithet, that "The toss-pots still have drunken heads," and whilst such Bacchanalians continue to reside there, it will ever retain the name of

"DRUNKEN BIDFORD."

CHAPTER XIII.

INCIDENTAL REMARKS ON THE BIOGRAPHY OF SHAKSPEARE.

The Elizabethan age is one which particularly adorns our English annals. The invention of printing, then in general use, afforded facilities for the diffusion of those great thoughts which prepared the world for a mighty change; whilst the Protestant Reformation had quickened many a manly heart, which, once released from the bondage of superstition, shook off a priesthood that had stunted all the energies of mankind, and rendered all the efforts of human progression abortive. Those parts of the world which had thus thrown off their leading strings produced a galaxy of talent unequalled in any other period—an era in which England shone conspicuously, and above all, most pre-eminently, in the advent of so rare a genius as Shakspeare, born at Stratford-on-Avon, on St. George's Day; a presage to mankind that he would become the tutelar genius of British poesy, as the martial saint had been of chivalry.

The discovery of the New World made all received traditions of the old one seem obsolete; everything required the charms of imagination and romance, for men were no longer satisfied with the dull realities of life; even the biographers of Shakspeare appear to have been tinctured with the same spirit, and desirous of giving an ancestral importance to his name, as if the accidental circumstance of birth could render him more illustrious, when

> "Kings for such a name would wish to die."

It is conjectured that John Shakspeare, the poet's father, if not a native of Stratford, came to reside there about the year 1550. He after-

wards married Mary, the youngest daughter of Robert Arden, of Wilmcote, whereby he became possessed of some sixty acres of land, called "The Ashbies," he also rented a meadow and appurtenances at Ingon. In a deed alienating some property in Henley Street, Stratford-on-Avon, it is described "As situated between the houses of George Badger, draper, on the west side, and John Shakspeare, *yeoman*, on the east side," which exactly corresponds with the existing boundary of William Shakspeare's birthplace; showing, beyond all doubt, his father's occupation. Aubrey asserts John Shakspeare was a butcher, but he adduces no evidence to prove he ever followed such a trade, unless, indeed, he might have occasionally slaughtered and sold some of his own-fed stock, as farmers frequently do; and yet, in no proper sense of the word, have been a butcher.

Rowe states he was a woolstapler and dealer in wool, which statement remains unsupported, except it may be said it received a doubtful confirmation from a pane of stained glass, in the kitchen window of the house in Henley Street, representing the arms of the Merchants of the Staple. This purpose, however, it could not answer, inasmuch as it is clearly shown that Shakspeare Hart, being employed to repair the windows of the chapel of the guild, brought it thence, and introduced it into his own window.

Malone discovered, as he thought, that the poet's father was a *glover;* but the individual he speaks of was another John Shakspeare, in very humble circumstances, and who, from being mentioned in the records of Stratford, has been mistaken for the poet's father. With these slender facts before us, how can we say, with any degree of certainty, that he followed any other occupation than that of a *yeoman*, cultivating his own property, and renting lands of others? That "He was the architect of his own fortune" is beyond a doubt, for he filled the humblest offices of the corporation, and rose from step to step, as he became possessed of houses, tenements, and lands, until he was elected high-bailiff in 1568, and thus became a person of reverence, which position he maintained till his decease, as the following extract from the parish register of Strat-

ford-on-Avon, certifies :—"1601, Sept. 8, *Master* John Shakspeare was buried."

His alliance with Mary Arden was productive of eight children: the poet was the third in order of birth, for on reference to the same authority, we find:—"1564, April 26, Gulielmus, filius Johannes Shakspeare." The three brothers and two sisters of the bard apparently arrived at maturity, but are unknown to fame except by the reflected lustre of their immortal brother. It would be an undoubted absurdity to suppose there would be any record of the childhood of an humble yeoman's son, suffice it for us to know, that whilst "Muling and puking in the nurse's arms," he happily escaped the plague which, in a few months after his birth, decimated the population of his natal town.

Of his schoolboy days, there is nothing definite: it is probable he received his education at the Free Grammar School of Stratford-on-Avon, then under the mastership of Thomas Hunt, curate of Luddington. The humble minister of religion, who was Shakspeare's first instructor, has left no memorial of his talents or acquirements: he was succeeded by Thomas Jenkins, whose merits are also unknown, but whether their pupil was an apt scholar, or "Creeping like snail unwillingly to school" we have no record.

The particular occupation for which he was instructed, is equally uncertain: Aubrey says he was brought up to his father's trade of a butcher, and that when he killed a calf he would do it in high style, and make a speech. Rowe says he was trained to his father's craft of wool-combing, but from falling into low company, and his habits of deer-stealing, he was compelled to fly his country—thus Stratford lost an indifferent woolcomber and the world gained an immortal poet; another biographer states he was placed in an attorney's office, others say he was a school-master; it is also stated that he was a gardener—evidently from his familiarity with the terms and practice of horticulture: and all of them quote passages from his works in support of their particular opinions. In the absence of any positive evidence to show that he ever followed any of the occupations ascribed to him, it is fair to suppose that, whilst his father,

John Shakspeare, was busily engaged in cultivating his own lands and those he rented of others, his eldest son would be expected to make himself useful in the same pursuits; hence he would gain the most favourable opportunity for the development of his poetic genius, as it would enable him to see with his own eyes all nature's glorious works.

At the early age of eighteen he became the arbiter of his own fortune, and married Anne, the daughter of Richard Hathaway, a substantial yeoman of Shottery, Old Stratford, as it is frequently called. He had scarcely completed his nineteenth year before the claims of a parent were added to those of husband, and in the following year they were increased by the birth of twins; but the rapidity with which Shakspeare's family gathered round him, does not seem to have produced any very sedentary effects upon his restless mind. It is highly probable that young Shakspeare, having no other settled employment, followed husbandry; and that, whilst visiting his father's lands at Ingon, which skirt the woods of Charlecote, he would wander through the romantic glades drinking deep draughts of inspiration, and reveling in that mute luxury of thought, which enabled him in afterlife to enchant mankind with his inimitable portraitures of woodland scenes.

It could not, however, have been in solitude and seclusion that he acquired his knowledge of mankind; but he must have had habits and propensities similar to his own "Prince Hall," for there can be little doubt that, in early life, he was to be found running about the neighbourhood of Stratford, in company with all the madcaps of the town, who, in their excursions, would quaff potations pottle deep with "Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincote," or laugh at the adventures of "Christopher Sly," sympathize with Davy who besought Justice Shallow "To countenance William Visor, of Wincote, against Clement Parks of 'The Hill,'" enjoy the frolic of Silence nicknaming goodman Puff, of Barson, revel with the Topers and Sippers, and be the boon companion of Norton, mine host of the Falcon, of Bidford, and thus did the youthful bard gain the knowledge he has developed of every phase of human life.

Some of Shakspeare's biographers have endeavoured to soften and

explain away his early irregularities; they seem, however, natural to his romantic turn of mind, and a poaching exploit, with some jovial marauders, in Sir Thomas Lucy's park, would strike his eager and yet untamed imagination as something delightfully adventurous. This invasion of Charlecote Park, it is said, was visited with so much severity that, in a spirit of retaliation, the young bard wrote a rough Pasquinade, which was affixed to the park gate, and this flagitious attack upon the dignity of the knight so excited his ire, that Shakspeare was obliged to leave his wife and family in Warwickshire and seek seclusion from his wrath in London.

Arrived in the great metropolis, it is said he endured great hardships, although, as there is no proof that he had forfeited the esteem of his own or his wife's father, it is probable they, from their position, furnished him with such supplies as would have obviated any very great privations. Richard Burbage, Thomas Green *alias* Shakspeare, and the poet were of one county and almost of one town: if all of them did not take their way together, the two former had preceded him, and they must have been made of sterner stuff than players usually are if they allowed a townsman at least, if not a kinsman, to have been reduced to any such extremities as some commentators have roundly asserted he endured.

Aubrey's account of Shakspeare, brief and imperfect as it is, says,—"This William, being inclined naturally to poetry and acting, came to London, as I guess, when about eighteen, and was an actor at one of the theatres, and did act exceedingly well, for his wit and pleasantry soon rendered him an universal favourite." There we lose sight of him for a few years, with all his sympathies naturally aroused at a separation from all that was dear to him; however, about the year 1590, he emerges from the obscurity which enveloped his earlier history, and

"As the sun breaks through the darkest clouds,"

so did his genius overcome all obstacles of birth, education, or misfor-

tune: so did he begin a career of literary glory, in which, for twenty successive years he gave to the world, as if heedless of the treasure, and prodigal from the very excess of wealth with which his mind was stored, some forty matchless plays, besides poems rich in the vocabulary of words with more exquisite sweetness, ardent feeling, tender pathos, sound philosophy, greater variety, and far mightier genius than any other poet from the earliest times,—a model for dramatic and lyric writers of all succeeding ages.

The quaint "Mummeries" and tedious "Mysteries," in fashion previously to Shakspeare's days, soon gave place to his spirit-stirring plays which ravished every ear and captivated every heart: his mighty thoughts he "Married to immortal verse" that gave to all the dull realities of life a charm of romance, drawing admiring multitudes to weep at Desdemona's fate, to sympathize with the loves of Romeo and Juliet, with the ideal speculations of Hamlet, and the bitter sorrows of King Lear, "Or read with detestation the misdeeds of Glo'ster." The genius of the inimitable dramatist was not confined to the "Globe," where he gained "Golden opinions from all sorts of men" which nightly filled its coffers, but, in the language of the great moralist, he soared above this life,—

"Exhausted worlds, and then imagined new."

In the prime of life his exertions were crowned with wealth, with honours, and renown, and he returned to Stratford-on-Avon, "Having purchased the largest and best house in the town, where he continued to supply the stage with two plays every year, for which he had an allowance so large that he lived at the rate of a thousand pounds a-year." As a relaxation from his mental labours he became the cultivator and proprietor of the lands, the possession of which, in the most ardent aspirations of his youth, he could never have anticipated: but this was a state of happiness too great to last; for, although on the 25th March, 1616, he praised God that he was of perfect health and memory, and "Did make and ordain his last will and testament," yet within a month—a little

month, mankind had to deplore the fulfilment of his own prophetic words,—

> "This day I breathed first, time has come round;
> And where I did begin, there shall I end;
> My life has run its compass."

"Shakspeare, Drayton, and Ben Johnson had a merry meeting, and it seems drank too hard, for Shakspeare died of a fever there contracted." Such is the only account extant of the death of Shakspeare, and it is one which may be contemplated without painful emotion; for, if he accelerated his end by drinking, it was in accordance with the spirit of his times, and on an occasion when it would be difficult to say where excess begins or hospitality ends; at a merry meeting with two of his most illustrious friends, and the last of many social hours.

Whatever the cause of his last illness may have been, it was but of short duration, for he died on the 23rd of April, 1616. The day he accomplished his fifty-third year he descended to the grave, beloved for his natural and cheerful habits, in the full possession of those faculties with which his Maker, beyond all other sons of men, had so signally endowed him, and was buried, on the 25th of the same month, in the chancel of Stratford-on-Avon church. He left that which no other British poet hath ever done,—an ample freehold, unincumbered, estate to his descendants; and the malediction in his epitaph has kept his ashes undisturbed within the hallowed sanctuary of his grave.

> "His good remembrance,
> Lies richer in your thoughts than on his tomb."

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